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Presentation Transcript
Poverty of Spirit
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We're doing a series on *The Beatitudes* today. This is the second one in the series. We're covering the first beatitude – *Poverty of Spirit*.

In the introduction to this series, recently, we laid out some observations. The first one was that the beatitudes are *not* just a warmup for the Sermon on the Mount, but they are *core* instruction, out of which everything else flows. The beatitudes were delivered to the disciples, preparing them for church leadership. So this is the fundamental stuff of Christian life and success with God. They are kingdom skills. Each one is the foundation of the one before. We posited that. In other words, they are steps for growth and each one must be accomplished before the next one can be undertaken. They are also seven attitudes that define Godly character in human beings. And we also said that we believe that each one has a connection to the holy days – seven holy days, seven beatitudes.

Let's go to Matthew 5 and read the first one.

Mt. 5:1 – *When He saw the crowds He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him and He began to teach them saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

So what does that mean? If that's the first step in spiritual growth, what does that mean? Well, "blessed are." Let's look at that. That means "happy are you," or "you are blessed." So, when we're this way, it's *good* for us. It's a blessing. It's an advantage.

"...in spirit." Let's look at that part next. You might not have to turn here, but I'm going to look in John 11:33. It says:

Jn. 11:33 – *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews, who had come along with her, also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*

There are many other places where it talks about people being "joyful in spirit," "troubled in spirit," "grieved in spirit." When the Bible uses the term – *in spirit* – it means that it comes from all the way down deep in the mind and the heart – at the core of the person.

With all this new brain science, they're learning how the brain works, but they're starting to get suspicious that there is something underneath that, and it makes it a *mind*, that they haven't been able to identify yet. So, they're right. They just don't know what that is. That's the spirit. So when a person rejoices in spirit, or they groan in spirit, or they're poor in spirit, it comes from the deepest part.

We're talking about the deepest fundamental belief that a Godly person has. So whatever poverty of spirit is, it has to be rudimentary, reflective, knee-jerk, deeply held, an attitude, an approach, a frame of mind, a belief, a conviction that underlies everything else. What's left to look at? Well, that word *poor*. What does that mean? Well, it means *weak*. What's the meaning of it to us, though? What is the conviction?

Let's look at Jesus' model poverty of spirit for us. It's in John 5, and verse 30 – one of the many places He does that. He says:

Jn. 5:30 – *By Myself, I can do nothing. I judge only as I hear and My judgment is just, for I seek not to please Myself, but Him who sent Me.*

So Jesus said that He could do nothing. What does that mean? God in the flesh saying He's completely weak without the Father? Wow! Could He get up in the morning by Himself? Could He feed Himself? Could He go to work in His carpentry business? Like us? We do that. Well, yes He could – as long as God sustains the universe so there is a universe to live in. He could use the functionality that God put in Him to self-sustain. When you put it in those kinds of terms, then even the things that we think we can do for ourselves depend completely on God – even the simple things.

But that really is not the context of this verse. He's being questioned about the spiritual powers that He had. And He admitted that in spiritual matters, without God, He was *powerless*. So poverty of spirit is to realize, at our deepest part, that we are completely in need of and dependent on God *all* the time for everything. It's that self-emptying conviction that we are completely void of spiritual understanding, except by God's revelation – and that we even draw our breath by His permission. It's that, in spiritual things, we are poor beggars – in total lack – helpless before God – and in physical things, totally at the mercy of time and chance, corruption, violence and nature itself. It's to be void of the human traits of arrogance and self-will. It's to be yielded, submissive and teachable by God.

We could paraphrase it and say, *Blessed are those who know that without God's revelation, they would know nothing about Him. Blessed are those who rate themselves as temporary and helpless before God. Blessed are those who are of no great stature in their own eyes, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

So how does that attitude look when we see it in the world today – if we can see it? It's really interesting where you find it sometimes.

I worked with a client for sometime, who I thought suffered from narcissistic personality disorder. He was alcoholic. He was abusive to his children. He was impatient. He was angry. He was rude. He had a terrible attitude toward women. He thought himself very superior to all women. And he got that way because he was beaten and belittled repeatedly by his father when he was a child. To defend himself against that barrage of derogation and abuse, he became extremely angry and self-centered. He probably *had* to be to survive in that environment.

So I was working with him and, I'm telling you, it was tough slogging. But one day, lo and behold, he stopped drinking and he joined a twelve-step program. He came in one day and told me that he was working on patience. And I said, "Well, how are you going to do that?" He said, "Well, I have to surrender my will to God." And I said, "Well, how will that help you?" He said, "Well, the only way to win is to admit defeat and surrender – surrender to victory." I said, "Give me an example." He said, "Last week I was adding a room on my house and things weren't going very well, so I punched a hole in the wall and cursed at my kids. And what I should have done was admit weakness, walk away, pray and ask God to take over, because I can't do it by myself." "Do you really believe that?" I said. He said, "I know it's true, but I'm having a hard time remembering." So, in the twelve-step program, they have figured out that the solution is not to boost self-esteem – and his was very low – but to help him accept himself, weaknesses and all, and then know there's a God who can fill in the gaps. That's the basis of the twelve-step program.

It's interesting, isn't it, that, in a world where self-esteem reigns supreme and is considered the epitome of mental health, the most effective program that has ever been devised to deal with addiction is the twelve-step program. And it's fundamental belief is *humility* – weakness. So that's pretty good. And I know there are a lot of people listening to this who would be upset and think that I should give an example of somebody in the church who has that. But Jesus told that man – that lawyer – "You're not far from the kingdom of God." Well, I think my friend, who is somewhat narcissistic, is on the right track. I think he is.

I was thinking about the city of San Francisco recently. I was born there. I grew up thirty miles south on the peninsula. And there's a certain attitude that comes along with living in that city and in the bay area generally. They call San Francisco *The City*. That's how it's referred to by the locals. It's cosmopolitan. It's sophisticated. It's epicurian. It's urbane. It's refined. It's liberal. It's open-minded. It's free-swinging. It's fast-paced. Life is about money, power, food, pleasure. And they have talk shows about homemade beer and coffee. Anything that you can put in your body, they talk about it as a good thing. It's looked up to by everybody – you know, Silicon Valley and San Francisco, the most fun city in North America. It's interesting. We could well be the most abhorrent city on the face of the earth to God – unspeakable suffering at every social level, an attitude of lawlessness and arrogance that runs deep. And yet, when we lived there some years ago, one day, in fifteen seconds, all that changed. And the change was good. People suddenly became polite and humble, sharing, service minded, generous, loving, caring, kind, cooperative. What caused the change? An earthquake. The Loma Prieta earthquake hit

back in – I don't know what year it was – 1987, 8, 9 – somewhere in there. It knocked down a lot of really heavy things. Shook everybody up. We were out of town when it hit – at the Feast in Redding – and on TV we saw downed sections of Interstate 880. That was a double-decker freeway. It all collapsed, crushing hundreds of cars. It happened during rush hour traffic. Missing a span of the bay bridge – we saw that. We saw the nightmarish pictures of the Marina District.

All of sudden, what was so important to people, suddenly became *unimportant*. Money didn't matter. Where you lived didn't matter. What kind of car you drove didn't matter. Who you worked for, who you controlled – none of that mattered. What mattered was taking care of people. It was amazing. All of sudden, all that sophistication and income and social status just went right out the window – way down the ladder of importance. Everybody was equal. Everybody was frightened and shaking – just leveled the playing field. Powerful stuff – that humility. It did amazing things.

Of course, as the days and weeks rolled on after the quake, everything went back to the way it was before. They rebuilt the bay bridge. They lifted the freeway back up. All the stuff was replaced in the Marina District. And everybody forgot how temporary, how weak, how desperate they were and returned to that self-centered, all powerful delusion that they enjoyed before the earthquake. And it *is* a delusion. It's a false sense of reality that we live in.

So that is what I can say to you to try explain what poverty of spirit is. But why is it so fundamental to a relationship with God? Why is it the *core* understanding about our relationship with God? I am weak, but He is strong. Remember the song? That's about as easily as you can say it. Do you remember what Job said at the end of his story? After all the suffering, all the talking, he said, "Now my eye sees you! I *finally* get it! I'm not great. You are. I had no idea how great you were." That's poverty of spirit – part 1. He had to lose everything to realize it. So it's fundamental. And it's about our relationship *to God*. That's why it's fundamental. Who is God? And who are we? And where do we fit into a relationship with Him? And how would we act based on that relationship – based on His characteristics and ours?

It's also about *faith*. And faith is fundamental. If we look in Hebrews 11:6, it says:

Heb. 11:6 – *Without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anybody who comes to Him, must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.*

So do you see what that says? It says that we're not going to have a good relationship with God unless we realize He takes care of us and that we can't take care of ourselves. So when we're poor in spirit – all the way to our roots – then we get it. We *know* about our relationship with God and how it has to work. We're weak and He's strong. We can't lean on our own understanding. We have to trust Him. And as soon as we forget that, off we go to la-la land – out of touch with the reality of God and the way everything works in His creation.

What happens when we forget? God does want us to think for ourselves and to be free so that we can learn and so that we can produce, but if we don't know that we're weak and God is strong, then our thinking may not be tested against what God has already said to us. People come up with some of the weirdest ideas – all in the name of serving God – because they think, or they forget, that He knows best and that we have to rely on the things that He *tells* us as the foundation for any extrapolation that we might make.

We were talking about the eucharist earlier today. The eucharist is an extrapolation of the Passover. People thought that they could make it better – make it more helpful. And what they actually did was just water it down to where it is meaningless. God tells us how He wants us to observe the Passover. And if we have poverty of spirit, then we do it the way He says.

I was watching a video the other day called, *Be Still*. It's about prayer. And the idea that they present in there about prayer is different from what I was taught. In addition to talking to God in prayer, we can also *listen*. I think I know why we were taught that prayer is only talking. I think that people were afraid that, if we listened, we might come to some wrong conclusions. I can just see somebody sitting down on their bedroom floor, waiting for God to speak to them, when suddenly they get the idea that we should create an eighth day of the week and worship on that. "So I better start a new church." I mean, I've seen things weirder than that. And people tell me that they heard that from God. The things that come out of our own weakness and woundedness is terrifying.

On this DVD, one of the presenters mentioned that when we listen to God, we always need to remember that God is *always* consistent. The things He tells us are always consistent with the things that He has spoken before. Now when you think about that, that just puts it all in perspective, doesn't it? But to remember this takes poverty of spirit. We have to remember that God has already spoken to us a lot. Most of what He wants us to know is already written down for us. Praying while reading the Bible, then, is a good way to listen to what He has to say, isn't it? That was the point they were making, I think – at least, one of them.

When we forget that God knows more than we do, and that He has already explained a lot of things to us, and that we shouldn't assume that we know best, but we should always check in with Him on what He has already said and study His word, then we really have a leg up. We have a foundation.

Now I promised that I would explain how this beatitude relates to the salvation plan, so I'm going to do that. What is the first step in God's plan? Well, it's the Passover, isn't it? We know that the seven steps of His plan are pictured by the seven annual festivals. We know that the Passover is the first one. We know that pictures the death of Jesus Christ. Why did He have to die? Well, to pay the penalty for our sins. We know that. Right? It's not something we could do by ourselves, is it? The only thing we could do to pay for our own sins is to die for them. So, once again, we're helpless before God – to take that step in the plan. No power to live. Completely dependent on God for salvation.

A friend asked me once why I kept the Sabbath. He was not in the church – not in any church. He didn't go to church. And I explained to him that the Sabbath was a day that God gave us to be close to Him and all that. He said, "But isn't it enough just to be a good person?" That was his philosophy. You hear this everywhere. "Just be a nice person. Don't hurt people. Take care of people." That's a very good thing to do. And I told him I believed that was a good thing to do. But I asked him, "Have you always been a good person all the time – a 100%? Have you *always* taken care of people?" Well, no. So *being* good and *trying* to be good are two different things. We can't *be* good, so we need God to make up the difference. We can't be good all the time. Then I said, "But let's go back to the Sabbath a minute. It's true that one of the commandments is to love fellow man – to be a good person, be charitable, send money to Haiti, to New Orleans, to help people who were made homeless by the tsunami – but there's another commandment, too, you know, that defines what is good, as well. And that is to love God. Right? It's what it says. So that's just as important as being good to fellow man. So that's why I do it – imperfectly though I might try. I even need help with that. I want to show love to God. And He says that's one of the four main ways I can do that. So I'm trying to be good to fellow man and I'm trying to be good to God. And I'm not really good at either one of them. I'm helpless."

So what quality does it take, then, to receive the Passover? It takes poverty of spirit. Unless we know we're spiritual beggars – impoverished, helpless, sold under sin, like Paul said – helpless in the face of our own foolish sins – the Passover doesn't really have any meaning. The core attitude we need to receive it is poverty of spirit – to know that God knows best and that He's the power and we have none – that we'd know nothing about Him except He reveal it to us. We can do nothing to undo our past. Only He can do that.

1 Corinthians 11:27 – there's a warning issued.

1 Cor. 11:27 – *Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.*

Okay. That's pretty severe, isn't it? If we don't do it in a worthy manner, then we're going to be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. So what does that mean? Well, he explains it.

V-28 – *A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats or drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

So we have to examine ourselves and we have to determine whether or not we need it. And that comes from that attitude of realizing that, in these things, we can't do anything – that it all comes from God, and that we need to throw ourselves on His mercy and receive His forgiveness, and to come under the blood of Jesus Christ.

We had a discussion here about how to keep Passover recently. I was just thinking about that – not so much what was said, but just the whole issue. What we think about that really isn't important. What *God* tells us is *everything*. That's what is important. Paul made this statement because the Corinthians were feasting on that night, instead of keeping it as a solemn ceremony. They were thinking too much – trying to make it better – and listening too little – didn't hear what was said – not poor in spirit, regarding their observance of the Passover. So that's kind of an example of how we, with the best of our intentions, when we forget what God has said, we always muck it up.

How can we conclude this? Well, I want you to turn with me to Matthew 7, and verse 24. This is what Jesus said. Think about this. He said:

Mt. 7:24 – *Therefore, whoever hears these sayings of mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain descended, the floods came, the winds blew and beat on that house, and it did not fall, for it was founded on a rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain descended, the floods came, the winds blew and beat on that house, and it fell. And great was its fall.*

So, if we want to be successful in our calling – in our life, in our walk with God in *all* our endeavors – we need to get in touch with the reality of God. We are weak and He is strong. If we can get that, if we can put aside our own inclination, and submit ourselves to what God tells us to do, then we're a leg up. We're in touch with reality more. We need to trust Him and not ourselves. And if we can do that, then the way is paved for spiritual growth and even better – *blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*